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ABSTRACT

Although going barefoot is the easiest way for a vegetarian to deal with the problem of footwear, it is an impractical solution for those who are faced with harsh weather conditions. There are many nonleather, natural, and synthetic man-made material sandals, boots, and shoes. For the person who needs foot protection, there is a company that has designed a boot that costs one-half its leather counterpart with twice the durability. The footwear needs of an individual who works in a contemporary business or office setting can be met by a canvas and rubber shoe that performs excellently and looks good at one-sixth the cost of its leather counterpart. A more widely available shoe for less formal purposes is the open weave, mesh top shoe, which comes in three colors and is practical in terms of wearability, style, and cost. Sandals are internationally popular, simple, inexpensive, and cool in hot climates. There are many varieties of sandal, from synthetic rope soles and straps, tire-tread soled sandals, Japanese wooden sandals, which are relatively easy to make, to the form-fitting wooden sandals of India which are more difficult to construct. Also in vegetarian India there are water buffalo hide sandals, the leather for which is obtained from animals that died naturally because of age or disease. Other popular styles are plastic Chinese sandals, thongs, and garden togs. The Mongolian felt footwear is warm and practical if worn indoors or inside other shoes meant to be worn outdoors. (AEM)

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BY

James M. Oswald

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VEGETARIAN FOOTWEAR

James M. Oswald

Going barefoot as often as possible is undoubtedly wholesome, but even nature loving vegetarians need and appreciate good shoes. Sandals will do, boots, and there are many varieties of alternative footwear appealing in terms of health, economy, and appearance. Most vegetarians (lacto-, ovo-, lacto-ovo-) and fruitarians work daily and require durable and stylish footwear. It is available in a wide variety of colors, styles, and shapes.

Leather shoes are common in western societies these days, but costs of materials and labor are encouraging manufacturers to produce more products using cloth and plastics, rubber, cork, wood, and rope. It is now possible for consumers - vegetarian or not - to terminate their use of leather and walk about quite nicely in "non-leather" - natural and synthetic man-made material sandals, boots, and shoes.

But what about laborers? Ironworkers and stone masons? A forester may be vegetarian yet need foot protection and traction in winter snow and spring rain. Leather rots under

these conditions, waxes and oils are used to keep feet dry yet they soften and hasten deterioration of the leather. New synthetic materials allow moisture to wick away and evaporate. Hard-toe and even steel-toe boots are available for hikers, farmers, ditch diggers, and anyone else requiring sturdy protective footwear.

Austria's Koflach Company, world famous for ski boots, offers a tough hiker-worker boot design with a removable fabric liner for comfort, ventilation, and insulation. Testing a pair over two years indicated their excellence in rain, snow, gardening, digging, wood cutting - throwing and stacking, hay baling, and construction work. In comparison to twice as costly Austrian leather boots worn over the previous two years observed differences were dramatic. The leather boots got wet, stayed damp, scuffed, and really didn't ever mold to the feet - whereas the ribbed polyurethane synthetic material did not scuff, did adapt physically, and remained drier under even wetter conditions. They were by far the superior boot for comfort and wear. Toe and arch protection seemed equal to the traditional leather product. No conditioners were required at any time, just water, brush, and soap. Tne disadvantages? These Koflach boots were gray, but to some eyes appeared lavender. Wear mellows them. The design was described by some friends as "spacey." They are also available in white. If you are secure enough to appear wearing gray "space" design boots in your work and recreation, seriously consider these from

Koflach. Their cost was approximately half of the leather articles they replaced and their life expectancy also appears to be about twice. (Recreational Equipment Incorporated, P.O. Box C-88125, Seattle, Washington 98188-0125, $69.95.)

Steel-toe rubber boots, rugged low-top and high-top designs, are available for swamp and inclement weather and working with acids and oil (Wear Guard Work Clothes, Norwell, Massachusetts 02061, $19.99 to $31.99).

As for style in contemporary business and office settings, bankers, corporate executives, what is available to compete with black leather? For the dentist, doctor, teacher, and lawyer? An Italian designer, Giorgio Brutini, teamed up with a Taiwan manufacturer of "Turtle's" footwear to produce a fabric and rubber shoe which any stylish night club performer or mortician would be proud to wear. Sleek, black, these are unobtrusive. No one will notice, they'll assume your'e wearing good looking black leather shoes. Testing these over two years in mid-Atlantic urban situations provided the following results. On rainy days feet stayed drier than previously when six times as costly leather shoes had been worn. When drenched they dried easily and quickly. They felt lighter, providing a spring to the step which their heavy predecessors had diminished. The tops are subtle using concealed velcro fasteners. Soles are black rubber which tread softly and grip well. They were quickly broken in, did not stretch to a sloppy

fit, and required no shoe trees at night. In snow - this was surprising - feet did not get wet. Nor did they soil - this was amazing. No polishing or cleaning whatever was needed over twenty-four months. They ventilated and insulated well, at zero feet were not cold and at one hundred degrees feet were not hot, even on sizzling sidewalks and asphalt. Worn on soil, grass, hard surfaces of every kind, navigating through and over the debris and potholes common in cities they were fantastic. On carpet indoors they feel light and pleasant, providing ideal office wear. A colleague insisted that the rubber soles would "make feet sweat" but apparently the upper fabric and terry cloth bottom liner provides sufficient ventilation. Durability? Alternating two pairs every other day, walking one to five miles daily, these shoes were still in good shape after six months. All wear was on the botton, the tops looked new. Put to less frequent use, a year would be a reasonable life expectancy. Dr. Scholl's liners were inserted in the two worn pair and they felt good as new (for only $1.98 additional cost per pair). For travel and light duty, these shoes will be continued in use several more years. They cost little and if double priced would still be only a third as expensive as the leather ones they replaced. If there's any negative to these shoes (for the banker and mortician this could distract) it is the small white rubber rectangle at the rear of each sole advertising "Turtle's". The small representation of a happy, smiling turtle wears off quickly and these labels can be peeled off if they would ruin

your day. A wearer's college age daughter thought them "cute" so the "Turtle's" labels were left on the experimental pairs. Worn in the United States, England, India, Kuwait, and Germany, these shoes attracted no negative but many favorable comments. "Very practical shoes," said a female Cuban professor friend, "I like them." In addition to black, beige is also available and the Georgio Brutini-"Turtle's" team also offers a higher topped similar shoe (Hanover Shoes, 1730 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103. Price has ranged from $8.99 to $19.88 depending on the season and they are not always in stock. Hanover is a national chain, "Turtle's" an international brand).

Widely available are the open weave mesh top shoes. White and beige are striking and may be difficult to keep clean, but the navy blue is handsomely formal. The light colored soles can be muted by edging them with black or navy blue polish. These are extremely cool for summer wear and with dark wool socks comfortable and classic in winter. From Thom McCan's to catalog suppliers and urban department stores, these shoes are practical in terms of style, wearability, and cost. Perhaps someday banker's black will become available.

Sandals are common footwear around the world. They're simple, inexpensive, cool in hot climates, and can be made of many different materials. Rope soles are comfortable on sandals and simple canvas topped shoes. Where money is in very short

supply, people cut abandoned tires into tread-soled sandals, inner-tube belts over the top attaching them to the wearer's feet.

A Missouri commune produces simple sandals with synthetic rope soles and web straps. Colorful and comfortable as well as tough (Eastwind Community, Box FB2, Tecumseh, Missouri 65760, $10.00 to $20.00 in a choice of colors).

Dr. Scholl's imports a European wooden sandal which unfortunately uses leather straps. These can be replaced, however, by plastic or fabric. Any shoemaker could handle the job and most homemakers as well (Woolworth, drug stores, and shoe stores, and catalogs often offer these at $15.00 to $20.00). Japanese ancients developed a wooden sandal rarely seen outside villages of Japan. Basically a rectangular plank, larger that the foot, is fitted with two smaller wooden cross-rieces which form treads (and lifts). Simple cloth straps secure these sandals on the elevated wearer. These can be easily made. More difficut to fashion would be the Indian sandals made of thin wood cut to conform to the foot's shape and held on by a spool shaped cylinder grasped between the large and next smaller toe. Gandhi wore these when he wasn't going barefoot.

Sandalmaking is an art in India as no where else. The climate is perfect - mostly dry and hot. Nearly a billion people walk,

bicycle and automobile have not taken over. The current high technology Indian offering is a synthetic, brown, molded, single-piece construction sandal. It's either very hard rubber, plastic, or a mixture. Tiny details resembling stitching and decor of water buffalo hide sandals is preserved for effect. Criss-cross straps flex and ventilate. The elevated shoe-like soles provide a heel and contain cylindrical holes on the bottom surface to cushion and cool one's walk. And they come in numbered sizes. The epitome of Asian-Western aesthetic blending, these are not currently known to be available in the United States (street vendors offer them in Calcutta at $12.00 and less).

Water buffalo hide sandals are prevalent in vegetarian India. They are traditional. The premise is that when a creature dies it may be skinned and the leather used. Drums in Hindu temples are also leather. Here is a matter of conscience. The Western shoe industry might win hearts among animal protectionist and vegetarian customers by trustworthy labeling to indicate whether donor creatures died naturally or by bullet or sword. They'd feel this inconvenient, no doubt, yet perhaps their children will become vegetarians and educate them. Surely much of the leather used in footwear comes from animals who died naturally of age and disase. Unfortunately, except in India and some Southeast Asian cultures, this leather is mixed in with that from slaughterhouses. For animals, vegetarians, and non-vegetarians a world without slaughterhouses is desirable.

We vote with our feet and when making footwear decisions influence world trade and many industries.

From China a reasonably good plastic (leatherette) sandal is available which has soft criss-cross straps of the same material, a fairly durable sole, and they are very comfortable. A pair of these lasted through two years of indoor use without any discernible wear. They fell apart, however, after three weeks of heavy outdoor wear in rural India, yet were repaired quickly for twenty-four cents. A Calcutta repairman crimped small nails through the plastic and returned the budget sandals to use. "Fix" he said and fix he did ($1.98 in discount stores).

Thongs are very popular, the simplest being foam rubber soles with thin rubber straps. Some hold up months under heavy wear but most are considered light duty shower and household wear. They can be refreshing after wearing heavy, confining, formal shoes. They seem to be available everywhere (Woolworth, $1.00 to $2.00).

Shoe store displays indicate few non-leather sandal alternatives. Canvas and rubber shoes are plentiful if usually white with olympian and patriotic touches of red and blue. They soil easily and fit into limited social occasions. . A sporty blend of genres is provided by a French product, plastic tread rope soled - the best of new and old - blue

cloth topped footwear (Church's of London, Paris, New York, and King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, $15.00).

At a recent community health fair the vegetarian feet which conducted this research were presented to a podiatrist. The summer day was hot, the feet cool wearing one dollr blue rubber thongs. "Your feet look good" she said. "I don't wear leather shoes," the feet's owner reported.

"I can see."

"And I go barefooted often as possible."

"You take good care of your feet."

"Any advice?"

"No, just keep doing what you're doing."

It felt good to hear this from a trained professional. Lots of callouses, blisters, and corns were being displayed in and out of ill fitting sweaty leather shoes. Next stop was the blood pressure booth: 100/66. "Really good," that professional said. (Might people with happy feet be helping their blood pressure?) Good food is fine and vegetarian footwear is good for the whole body too.

Dutch wooden shoes are world famous. Actually though, much of Europe was swampy and many cultures fashioned wooden wear. Informal research indicates that elm is a practical material for footwear alternately exposed to wet and dry conditions. Contemporary versions of these little boats are offered as "garden togs." A replacaeable insole is included. Brightly colored - blue, green, yellow, or red - solid molded plastic, these are found in German department stores and American catalogs (Smith and Hawken, 25 Corte Madera, Mill Valley, California 94941, men's $23.00, women's $19.00, childeren's $16.00).

Ah, felt. Mongolians do quite nicely on the cold windy plains riding horseback wearing felt boots and walking around in their spacious Yurt homes in felt houseshoes. Embroidered, they're stylish. Plain, felt footwear is practical. If the felt is made from fiber shorn from sheep, goats, or yaks - and kindly - most vegetarians can be comfortable sharing the wool. In North American climates retailers often stock felt liners to fit inside rubber boots. Alone these liners are wonderful indoor wear, especially where floors are cold. Hardier than socks and warmer than shoes, felt wear may be found with thin plastic soles attached. But the simple liners themselves wear well alone (in even sizes 3 through 14, L.L.Bean, Inc., Freeport, Maine 04033, $11.75).

After World War Two, DuPont offered a product intended to

replace and better the use of leather in shoes. This man made plastic was supposed to breathe, wear like steel, not scuff or require polishing. Consumers and shoemakers had accepted synthetic Neolote soles and rubber Cat's Paw heels. A synthetic shoe upper would have completed the transition. It seemed ideal, but market forces rejected this innovation. DuPont went on to Teflon and other successful products, Nylon continued to replace silk, their other plastics and paint sold well. People clung to bad habits, acted as if leather could not be replaced - at least not in their shoes. The 1985 Annual Report of Rohm and Haas indicates that the leather chemicals business is booming. They have opened new plants to keep up with demand and meet new technological demands. A frequent experience, according to the Report is responding to a manufacturer bringing in a leather sample inquiring, "Can you make this?" The answer is usually yes - any color, texture, surface finish. The style leather industry has learned to plasticize their product and make rapid changes to accomodate competitive forces and customer demands. The non-essentiality of the leather shoe trade has not become obvious to most so its inefficiencies continue. Consumers, without realizing, thereby pay a higher cost. Non-leather footwear is better value in ery sense of the word. DuPont survives and perhaps can someday be persuaded to try again - if and when there is large scale market demand for better-than-leather, leather-like, yet non-leather shoes.

Ladies shoes are a special area for research. Everywhere one looks shop windows offer leather, high-heeled, toe-compresssing pointed footwear. Informal observations aon the street, in elevators, and at the beach indicate too many foot problems are being suffered by females in this society. Callouses and corns and compression indentations along with blisters and twisted ankles are caused by ill-fitting not-designed-for-humans footwear. Vegetarian women in particular need help here. Perhaps podiatrists, surgeons, psychiarists, psychologists, and shoe designers could meet under some societal auspices. The Vegetarian Times? United Nations? Consumer Protection Agencies? "We've come a long way," it can be said, since ancient Chinese bound womens' feet to cripple them in some distorted misperception of beauty, but not yet far enough. "Help!" Women deserve support while modifying their selections and demanding decent products for the world's most important and beautiful feet.

Is there anything wrong with going barefoot? Children do it. Working adults do it in many places on the world. Where weather and local surface conditions permit, and it is appropriate to the task, it's a healthy practice. The author tested it in India, walking ten to twenty miles barefoot on each of three days. It felt good - the warm Indian soil.... There were no thorns, nails, metal bits, or broken glass to bother in rural India. On other days, wearing shoes and sandals, soil and sand were sometimes bothersome. Going from

land to water and back again made obvious the practicality of not bothering with footwear of any sort. If only at home and only some of the time - we probably ought to go barefoot. Many no doubt do. Everyone should try it. Awhile. Just for the primitive deliciousness of having feet really on the ground.

The practice of having outdoor shoes and indoor shoes makes a good bit of sense. As upstream swimmers, so to speak, vegetarians can lead in this area. Think about it. The debris we step on and in over the course of a day comes home with us. It's not really what one wants walked into their home. Slipping out of dirty outside footwear and into clean indoor wear begs consideration. Japanese do it, Asians of all sorts. Arabs do it, Middle-Easterners and Africans aplenty. European ancestors did it: from muddy wooden farming shoes into lighter house shoes they slipped. Indians and Amerindians have cultivated the civilized practice over thousands of years. Why don't we?

It seems appropriate to put in a word about socks. Wool and cotton seem desirable, silk liners under wool can be extremely durable and warm. Miracles are being claimed for Herculon and probably it is warm and comfortable and wears well. As we progress, wearing shoes less indoors than rustic pioneer ancestors, maybe socks and shoes will merge as they have in Japan in the thickly padded cotton houseshoe foot mitten sock which covers the large toe separately from the other four so

that toe-thong sandals (wooden or straw or plastic) may be slipped on quickly and worn as needed. Surely footwear evolution and development has not ended, innovation can be expected to continue if only for economic reasons. Leather is expensive now and it will become more expensive in the future. The chemicals, dyes, and labor involved in shoemaking -the traditional Western ways - are neither free or without problems. Technology alone predicts that shoes - and other products - are likely to be simplified. As this change occurs, how much better it will be if leather can be gotten out of the trade and better materials developed and used. You can be a part of this vegetarian led improvement. Go shopping. State your preferences. Inquire about alternatives to footwear. Merchants will respond. In fact, they already have. The customer is always right.

James M. Oswald, a lacto-vegetarian, writes, speaks, and consults. Readers are invited to address footwear related experiencs and suggestions to him at 333 Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania 19004.